FORM VERSUS FUNCTION IN TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGE

DR. SHILPI RISHI SRIVASTAVA

Assistant Professor
Department of Humanities
Feroze Gandhi Institute of Engineering & Technology
Raebareli (U.P.)-229001 (**INDIA**)

ABSTRACT

It is a well-established fact that language is the most important tool of communication. Generally, we can communicate easily and effectively in our mother tongue (MT) but if we talk about English which is our second language (L2) and which is used in very restricted domains create problem among students. As English Language teacher, people have different notions about which of the two concepts is more important and which needs to be emphasised in our classes. A grammar of forms makes us familiar with the grammatical structures and rules designed to show the systems and subsystems of a language work. But a grammar of functions puts together (i) the grammatical structures of a language, and (ii) how these grammatical structures and rules can be used by a variety of people in a variety of situations for interpersonal and organisational communication. Some teachers argues that study of forms makes it possible for the learner to understand how the language is built while others believe that too much focus on form can block communicative competence and it affects the function. The present research paper aims to investigate the role of form versus function in English teaching and tries to emphasise that as language teachers, we should be able to explore along with our students not only grammar of forms but also grammar of functions.

Keywords- Mother Tongue, L2, Communicative competence

It is a well-established fact that language is the most important tool of communication. Generally, we can communicate easily and effectively in our mother tongue (MT) but if we talk about English which is our second language (L2) which is used in very restricted domains creates problem among students. As English Language teacher, people have different notions about which of the two concepts is more important and which needs to be emphasised in our classes. A grammar of forms makes us familiar with the grammatical structures and rules designed to show the systems and subsystems of a language work. But a grammar of functions puts together (i) the grammatical structures of a language, and (ii) how these grammatical structures and rules can be used by a variety of people in a variety of

situations for interpersonal and organisational communication. People who study and use a language are mainly concerned with how they can do things with the language, how they can make meanings, get attention to their problems and interests, influence their friends and colleagues, and create a contented social life for themselves. They are interested in fulfilling certain functions like giving invitations, giving directions, accepting offers/jobs etc. Some teachers argues that study of forms makes it possible for the learner to understand how the language is built while others believe that too much focus on form can block Communicative competence and it affects the function. Many teachers and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have recognised that L2 learning seems to be fundamentally different from L1 learning. Among the observations is the fact that L1 learner are always completely successful in learning to speak their language whereas adult language learners often fail in their quest to learn L2 because their language learning faculty is time sensitive and vanishes as learner reach adulthood. Furthermore, the part of the L2 learners' success in acquiring a new language is sometimes affected by an outgoing personality, a willingness to take risks and desire to learn. They are also aware of the fact that students' progress in learning L2 is marked by an abundance of grammatical errors made by L2 learners. Interlanguage is the type of language produced by second or foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language. In language learning, learners' errorare caused by several different processes, which include:

a. Borrowing patterns from the mother tongue- language transfer is the effect of one language on another. It may be positive as well as negative. Negative transfer is the use of L1 pattern or rule which leads to an error or an inappropriate form in the target language (TL). For example, an Indian learner of English may produce the incorrect sentence; I am here since Friday instead of I have been here since Friday or you have done it? Instead of, Have you done it? Because of transfer of Hindi pattern. Whenever a Hindi speaker wants to speak or write in English. He starts translating or recollecting words in his mind to convey the message. It breaks the communication as it creates a barrier in communication. The sentence structure of Hindi is Subject+ Object+ Verb and English is Subject+ Verb+ Object. This translation disrupts the continuity of speech.

Positive transfer may also occur when both the native and target language have the same form. For example, French and English have the word table, which can have the same meaning in both the languages.

b. Overgeneralization- when a learner extends the use of a grammatical rule beyond its accepted uses:

Singular   Plural

DR. SHILPI RISHI SRIVASTAVA   2 P a g e

| Man | mans instead of men |
| Child | childs instead of children |

c. Communication Strategy- when the learner have limited command over the language; in trying to communicate, she/ he may have to make up for a lack of knowledge of grammar or vocabulary. For example, a child might say phools instead of flowers.

d. Fossilization occurs when incorrect linguistics features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language. Aspects of pronunciation, especially in the use of /s/ and / / are often fossilized.

These are the errors committed by L2 learners due to their mother tongue interference. But we cannot deny the fact that the errors also play an important role in the learning process and the role of mother tongue in teaching second language is also important. As a teacher of Professional Communication at B.tech level, I have personally realised that the students of State Board have good command over English grammar but over emphasis on grammar or accuracy of forms makes them less confident in speaking or fluency. And the students of Central Boards like C.B.S.E. or I.C.S.C have command over spoken English but they are often incorrect and not able to define why a particular subject concord with particular verb only. Recently, Training and Placement department of our college submitted a report concerning this problem that fifty percent of the eligible candidates could clear the online exam based on language skills and twenty five percent could clear G.D. and interview in the campus placement. This report not only emphasised the value of learning English but also emphasised that the form/accuracy and function both are equally important. Most of the competitive exams check the language ability of the students at the primary level which is form based and those who clear the first step get opportunity for appearing in group discussion and interview which is totally function based. Therefore, form and function both are important. ESL or EFL teachers need to develop Communicative competence among their students which includes linguistic competence and communicative competence.

If a learner has mastered the grammatical rules of the language, has memorised word lists, and is able to read and understand some passages of prose, has ability to translate them, then he/she has acquired linguistic competence. But the partial knowledge of the grammatical system would be useless if the learner is not able to ask for directions from a stranger in a strange setting or introduce oneself. Communicative competence is the ability to show not only linguistic or grammatical competence but also rules of use, when and where to use language appropriately. It is basically having the capability to use language in a speech community. It is important to know who is speaking to whom, the message or speech act, the contact or social

DR. SHILPI RISHI SRIVASTAVA 3 P a g e

relationship, the extra linguistic world situation, in addition to the language and function used. Richard, Platt, and Weber, 1985 defined Communicative competence. They said it includes:

A. "Knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language;

B. Knowledge of the rules of speaking, e.g. knowing how to begin and how to end conversation, knowing what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events, knowing which address forms should be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations;

C. Knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations;

D. Knowing how to use language appropriately."[1]

In reality form and function are closely related, which leads to the notion that accuracy as well as fluency is necessary for successful communication. As language teachers, we should be able to explore along with our students not only grammar of forms but also grammar of functions. But I feel that language cannot be learnt in isolation but within a social and cultural setting. So whether teaching grammar of forms or functions every activity should be contextual. For teaching grammar of forms dictogloss or grammar dictation and task based activities can be adopted. For teaching grammar of functions various activities can be adopted. Main thing is that we should provide them natural atmosphere or we should immerse them in the atmosphere so that they should speak naturally or not feel that they are doing something different. For this group discussion, mock-interview, role play, simulation, research paper presentation in seminars and conferences, debate and speech activities can be better option. In our language classes we go through many activities to develop accuracy and fluency in reading, writing, listening and speaking. Brumfit distinguishes between these two activities,

> "extensive reading is aimed at fluency but much intensive reading work is aimed at accuracy; free and situational writing exercises are aimed at fluency but all controlled and much guided writing is aimed at accuracy; listening exercises are aimed at accuracy but casual listening in the classroom has a major role as a fluency activity."[2]

The learner is the most important person in the classroom. However, the learner loses his importance in the teacher's anxiety to complete his syllabus or a lesson plan. Every teacher is concerned about the students' progress or welfare but unconsciously his personality dominates and the class becomes teachers centred. The learner centred class treats students as a "tabula rasa" or a clear slate to be worked over and changed by new knowledge. The

teacher becomes a guide or felicitator who promotes decision making and learner autonomy in the class. The learner centred teacher should focus on the following things in the class:

a. Communication in natural and meaningful atmosphere.
b. Integration of skills.
c. Real life (authentic) material.
d. Learning by doing.
e. Class organisation- individual, pair/group/whole.
f. Focus on meaning.
g. Learner involvement.
h. Teacher as felicitator.
i. Extending language use beyond the class.
j. Focus on using the language.
k. Focus on the process as oppose to product.

Fluency based activities need to be introduced in the language classes and learners involvement should be increased. The teacher should motivate and create tasks for the language skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking and let them free to express themselves in natural classroom situation. As we live in Hindi speaking state we cannot expect from the student to be in a state of readiness in order to learn how to scan for pragmatic information, unless we provide them with a reason for scanning and involve them in different language tasks. To quote Johnson,

> "The first most central, and by now most generally acceptable implications of the nature of these processes, is that they can only be practised in a language teaching which is task-oriented. [3]

The second implication of these tasks and activities is the concept of information. In all types of language activities, the purpose of interaction is to convey information. In order to make a conversation interesting there should be an element of doubt and information gap activities.

The third implication is that in a second language classroom students should be free to choose what they say within "real time" .The concept of selection or the freedom of expression is the basic to the process of fluent communication.

The forth implication is to match what happens outside the classroom with the activities within the classroom. Outside the classroom the students constantly and spontaneously interact. They are not stopped when they mix two languages or two forms. But in the classroom teachers can monitor their own speech acts, and the speech act of their students.

DR. SHILPI RISHI SRIVASTAVA   5 P a g e

To conclude EFL classes should be designed in such a way that it should focus on both form and function. Classes should be learner centred and activity based. Every activity should focus on form as well as function of English. But there should be gradual shift from form focused activity to function focused activity.

Terms- Mother Tongue, L2, Communicative competence, Linguistic competence, EFL (English as a foreign language), ESL (English as a second language), (SLA), Second language acquisition, (TL) Target language.

WORKS CITED

1. Richard, Jack, John Platt and Heidi Weber. (eds.). 1985. Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistic. Harlow, Essex: Longman. P. 49.
2. Brumfit, C.J. Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching-The Roles of fluency and accuracy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.p.53
3. Johnson, Keith, 'The production of functional materials and their integration within existing language-teaching programmes'. ELT Documents, 76/1:16-25, 1976.p. 199